The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
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Jim Omvig,
Mary Clarke
Iowa Department for the Blind, Des Moines, Iowa
9-28-2011

Clarke: My name is Mary Clarke. The date today is September 28, 2011. The time is about 9 o'clock. And, today I'm interviewing Jim Omvig. Jim has tremendous experiences in the history of blindness here at the

Department; and also experiences in his own life. And so, we're going to start back with the cause of his blindness and his childhood. Jim, do I have your permission to do this interview?

Jim Omvig: Yes, ma'am.

Clarke: Going back to your childhood, what was the cause of your blindness?

Omvig: Retinitis Pigmentosa; we learned that. Nobody knew about anything like Retinitis Pigmentosa. I think I was probably ten or eleven when my school decided to do more physical testing in the fall when school started, than we had done before. And I knew that I had some kind of problem. I couldn't play ball very well, and difficult things going on in school. So, we did a little physical this particular year. This was in Slater, Iowa at this time. And the gymnasium was where we were doing all these physicals with a whole slew of kids, was in there. The eye test was to stand at the free throw line and read the eye chart on the wall. And, I got up to the free throw line and looked over there and said, "What chart?" I couldn't see any chart at all on the wall, and that really alarmed the teachers.

And ultimately, well, first I got sent to an optometrist in Ames, Iowa. And he speculated that it might be Retinitis Pigmentosa, but suggested that we go down to the University of Iowa hospitals in Iowa City. And, that's where I went to testing there, and that's where they determined that it really was Retinitis Pigmentosa. It hit me more quickly than most people. If they get Retinitis Pigmentosa, or RP is the jargon, usually that comes on later on in life, a little bit.

So for me, I really had lost a lot of vision by ten-years-old; was quite surprising to the doctors. And it was also that I didn't just lose the peripheral vision; I ended up really losing central vision as well. So, everything just pretty much clouded. But, that's when we learned about this thing RP.

Clarke: Then did they provide training, any special training, for you when they found this out?

Omvig: None. Well, I started to say none at all; well, no training. The teachers in the school tried to accommodate me in a way. They had me sit in the front row. And, this was back in the late 1940s. There wasn't such a thing as accommodation or reasonable accommodation. Nobody knew about such terms at that time. But, just as a way…The reason for the sitting in the front row back then; there weren't flip charts either, so teachers wrote on the blackboard notes all the time. So, I just couldn't see those from sitting anywhere back in the room. So, sitting in the front row was one thing that they did. And that, of course, kind of singled me out and got other…Little kids can sometimes be mean; and some of them were. So I got started with the whole thing of being teased, because I had thick, very thick glasses at the time and, you know I was four eyes and all of the mean stuff that kids do. At that point, finally, the teachers would have me actually walk up to the blackboard if I needed to see something and know it. I'd actually walk up to the blackboard and read it, because I couldn't see it from the front row any longer either. But that was the effort that the teachers tried to do. And I suppose, as I look back on it, that they at least were trying. They had no idea what to do or how. There wasn't any special

training, or they would have had no backgrounding in work with the blind at all. So they tried, Mary, is what they tried to do.

Clarke: Then at one point, I think, you went on to school at Vinton; is that right?

Omvig: Yes. Then finally in the middle of my freshman year, I really couldn't read the print books anymore. I struggled, and my mom read to me at home sometimes to try to get lessons done. But, this blackboard thing really wasn't working anymore. So, there was apparently a kind of a traveling, oh, representative of the Iowa School for the Blind; that it was called then. Later it was changed its name to the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School. They got quite ashamed of the word blind, and so they took it out of their title. So, I went there and my parents, both Mom and Dad were quite excited. The only blind people we had ever seen at that time were in Des Moines. At that time, there were blind beggars on the streets. We would come into Des Moines. My little town was just 25 miles out, and so we would come into town for shopping and things. And there were blind beggars on the corner, begging with their tin cups and their pencils and things, so. And that was kind of our impression of blind people.

So, my parents were really excited. I suppose I was really scared, when you get down to it, to leave home and go. Back in those days, there was no question of going to school there and then coming home each weekend. You went to school in the fall, came home at Thanksgiving, went back, came home at Christmas, went back, came home at Easter, and then got out of school at the end of May. That's

the way it was. You were gone. It was called a residential school, and it truly was. You were there.

Now, the disappointing…two kinds of things were disappointing for me, and certainly my parents at the time. The one had specifically to do with the blindness training itself. I came to the school just at the time that the terrible mistake was made in work with the blind. And that was, oh, I'm not sure what we'd call it, but the Large Print movement. Somebody got the idea that we've got little blind kids with a little bit of vision. If we could just blow up the print really big, so that they…we…I was one of them. We could then read print and would not, as they put it, would not have to learn Braille. And so, I did not learn Braille at the Iowa School for the Blind. I've tried from time to time to think back, and access how it was. I think, probably, I could read this Large Print stuff ten to twelve words a minute; and that was max. And the people running the school at that time thought that that was better for me than to be blind and learn Braille, which is just an astonishing thing. I wish I had a copy of the letter. But my mother wrote to the school some time, probably in my sophomore year, I suppose, and requested that I get Braille. The superintendant of the school was a guy named Don Overby, at the time, wrote back to her and said, you know, "He's doing fine. He can always learn Braille when he needs it." (Laughter) And of course, frankly, I needed it badly then.

What I've learned then, on leaping forward to later in life; I've learned that the people who really are the experts in Braille--the younger you learn it, the better you are. There's something in the brain of a young kid that helps you learn certain things faster. And so, I did not learn Braille at the school for the blind. And there was no such thing as

cane travel developed, yet. The way that we moved around, the kid who had a little bit of vision would lead the totally blind kid around from class to class, is the way that it went. There were rules, for example. And I'm kind of getting more here, Mary, into the school than just Braille and other things. But, I guess I'll just finish it here, because it had to do with the attitudes about blindness that I learned at the school for the blind. There was a rule, that most students could not leave the campus at night. There was a little grocery store a few blocks away, and we liked to go there. But if you were totally blind, you could not leave the campus and go there unless you got one of the partially blind kids to be your guide and lead you; which taught an awful philosophical attitude. Now, I didn't understand any of this at that time, but it was teaching you some pretty tough stuff.

Other than that, the basic classes; no science, but I had history, and English, and literature, and the things that people have. I also had something else, the assumptions of employment. And this was not just at the Iowa School for the Blind; this was across the country at all of the schools. Most states, at that time, had a residential school for the blind. The assumptions were for employment, that what a blind person could do was to weave baskets, and to weave rugs, and to do a thing called caning chairs. Some people know what that means these days, and a lot of people don't. So I learned those skills, in addition to the educational stuff that went on. I did learn about the "business of chair caning;" got to be quite good at it, rug weaving, basket weaving. And the assumption was that these would be the careers that we would have as we got on out into the real world. Again, at the time I was at the school for the blind, I didn't know or had never heard the concept of role models;

learned all about that later. Well, I had one at the Iowa School for the Blind. There was one blind male teacher on the staff at the school. He was the man who taught us rug weaving, and chair caning, and basket weaving; and was essentially just a helpless blind guy who got led by his wife to the school every day. And he taught us these things. So, I'm telling you all of that to say that the experience at the school for the blind was just totally negative. By the time I graduated in 1953, and I had lost a little more vision by that time, I had no idea that there was anything in the world that I as a blind person could do. And incidentally, I still have just this little glimmer of vision. So I certainly didn't want to call myself blind. I used all kinds of words that you could pretend that you're not blind. But anyway, that was my experience at the Iowa School for the Blind. As I got older, and got experience, it was, it's tragic to realize what that school did at that time. Presumably, it has changed a lot now. And, although, I think I may have heard that it has just closed to just normal blind students now. But anyway, that was my first experience with, what the field calls, blindness professionals; and a very, very negative one.

Clarke: It pretty…lowers your self-worth for sure.

Omvig: Absolutely; just no feeling. They didn't bring in…They should have gone out and found some blind people who were doing things. And if they had searched, they could have found a few, not many. I have learned since that back in that era, the percentage of blind people who were working in America was probably about two percent. So, it was just virtually nobody was working, except in what came to be called sheltered workshops for the blind. Iowa didn't happen

to have one, or I'm sure I would have ended up there. Anyway, that was my experience at the school for the blind.

Clarke: Now, did you have some of your education, high school education, outside of Vinton?

Omvig: No. There was one student, and I'm not sure how they picked him, a guy named Frank Palmer. Don't... Well, maybe he might have become a chiropractor. I'm not sure. I met him only once, since. But they pulled him out of class at Vinton, and he went down town to the Vinton public high school for certain classes. But he was the only one in the school selected to go out into any public school setting.

Clarke: So then, when you left high school you went back home, then?

Omvig: Yes, went back home and lived with my parents in Slater, Iowa for the next eight years. As I said, I had no belief I could do anything in the world; just nothing. Well, I did start playing a little music then. I had played in the band at Vinton.

15:00

Omvig: Incidentally, I should say there were a couple of positive things. There was a swimming team; there was a wrestling team; there was a track team. And I was on those, and good at that kind of stuff. There was also a school band, and I learned to play the trombone and played in the school band. And that was fun! And that got me started in music.

And then, gradually, when I got home I began to fiddle around on the piano.

The story is frankly kind of funny, Mary. In the early '50s a lot of guys were learning to play ukuleles, and just singing and strumming on a ukulele. It just got to be a little rage around the country like rages happen. And so, I got a ukulele, and got quite good at it and learned chords. I happened to be one of these fortunate folks who can play by ear, and hear sounds, and know what chords are. So, I started playing the ukulele and got quite good at it. And then I started piddling with the piano, and by and by, I piddled enough that I got where I could really play the piano, and play certain songs by ear. And during that period from '53 to '61, I also took lessons from a couple of people. And so, I started to be a piano player, and a trombone player, and through that time I did two things. When I was at home I played some music in a couple of little combos.

And then in my little town of Slater, Iowa there was a creamery where the farmers haul in their cream and their milk. And it was a pretty good size creamery for a little town. And we made a lot of butter there, and shipped most of it to New York City. Somebody was needed to load trucks with butter, so I used to go down there and load trucks. Several days a week I would go down and still had a pin hole of vision. In my world, at that time, I assumed that I had to still have vision to do anything at all. So I did it for, I think, it was a dollar an hour. For five or six years, I loaded butter down there at the creamery, and then I played some music. During that period I didn't date. My assumption was what on earth would happen? I can't ever support a family, so I got no business trying to get tied or in love with somebody, and wanting to get married and go on with that kind of life;

because what can I do? Nothing! So, I didn't do that. It was a kind of miserable sort of life.

There's one interesting story. During that period, my mother was always just trying to help. And two kinds of things we did. She read stuff. Every time there was something in a newspaper about some miracle and somebody got vision back, we'd write to that doctor, if we could find out about it, and talk about how I had Retinitis Pigmentosa. And could that doctor do anything for me? And the letter would come back saying, "No, there is nothing to do." Then we'd be really sad for several days and hunt for something else. Then, I don't remember what year it was; would have been 1958 or 9 I suppose. My mom's brother came home from California. And, one night I had gone upstairs, maybe, to listen to a ball game or something, and I stepped out of my room to go to the bathroom. And I heard my mother just sobbing downstairs. And I listened, as a kid would do, at that time, and listened. And, what she was telling her brother was that she had gone down to that same University of Iowa Ophthalmological Clinic where I had first been diagnosed; and had gone down there to find out if she could give one of her eyes, so that it could be transplanted in me and I can see. And of course, the answer was no; that with Retinitis Pigmentosa that couldn't be done. So, she was sobbing to her brother, "What will he ever do?" "What will his life be?" Oh, lord! The feeling, Mary, of pain and depression that came over me at that point was just, you know, awesome; because here my mom, whom I love, just thinks also my life is over. If you stated my philosophy, and hers, and my dad's, I suppose, at that time, was in order to be successful or happy, you have to have vision period. That's

what we believed at the time. So, I had that eight-year period where I went through all of that, from 1953 to 1961.

Clarke: So, when did you meet up with Kenneth Jernigan?

Omvig: Met him in the fall of 1960. He came to Iowa in 1958, and I started to hear immediately. He was on radio; he was on television. Television was brand new at that time, and so there were only three stations. And one of the Des Moines stations here would get him on. There was kind of a talk, interview show, and he was on there. I heard him several times, and he was talking about blindness, and how if you get proper training and have the opportunity, blindness can be reduced to the level of a nuisance. You know, I thought the guy was absolutely nuts. Just did not seem possible.

Then my sister, who also has Retinitis Pigmentosa, had been living in Des Moines, and working down here; she became…Before the Center, which actually opened officially in July of 1960. It opened, but he had actually started some classes with a very few people before the Center even actually opened. And my sister, Janet Omvig, her last name is now Gawaith (G-A-W-A-I-T-H), was one of those early students that lived in one of the teacher's homes, and got some, oh, just whatever they could get, in addition to talking a lot with Kenneth Jernigan about things. And so, my sister started ragging on me about coming down to this new center. (Laughter) And, I was scared to death to think of the concept.

And then one day, after the Center officially opened in July of '60, doggone it if I'm not at the creamery loading trucks one day, when here comes Jim Witte and the whole student body. Jim Witte was the travel teacher at that time.

I assume that has come up somewhere on this tape already. And, they came with the whole student body to look at a creamery. And at that point, they're also looking at Jim Omvig. (Laughter) I was loading a butter truck there, and so Witte talked to me at that time about, you know, "Why don't you come down to this training center?" And, my sister was ragging on me, and then a Rehab. Counselor started to come see me, a man named Joe Klosterman. He is long since gone, I think. He started to come to see me. So finally, I agreed to come down.

I think it was in, well, I don't know the date, but it was in November of 1960. Came down and met this man, Kenneth Jernigan, whom I now had heard enough of that I thought he was just a nut, because he was talking fantasy. And, I knew what blindness was; I was one. And I'd lost virtually all of my vision at this time. So, I came into Kenneth Jernigan's office, and I expect about one minute. He didn't ever waste much time. I expect I was in his office a minute and he said, "Are you blind?" I was sitting across a desk from him, and I said, "Oh no, sir. I'm just a little hard of seeing." (Laughter) That was my jargon at the time. I did not want to use that ugly word, "blind;" even though I had gone to the Iowa School for the Blind. Now, I had come to the Iowa Commission for the Blind. Still, I didn't want to be one, and pretended that I wasn't. But, Jernigan didn't stop there. He said, "How many fingers am I holding up?" And even then, I didn't have the guts to be honest, so I guessed; just picked a number. And I forget what it was, but he said, you know, "You are blind, and you got to learn how to deal with it." And, it was like somebody sticking a knife into my heart. I felt, just felt, for somebody to say that was flat out, was just talking. And, then we chatted a while and started

talking about his philosophy of blindness, and then he did another zinger. He said, "How old are you?" And I said, "Well I'm 25." He kind of got thoughtful, and then he said, "Well, you know, a man of 25, you're going to live probably for 50 more years. What are you going to do for those 50 years?" And, oh lord, that was another zinger. (Laughter)

Then eventually, he took me on a tour of the Center. And there was a lot of construction. The Commission had just moved into this Fourth and Keo building shortly before then. There was remodeling going on, and ladders everywhere, and jack hammers going on everywhere. But he was proud of what he saw, and talked to me about coming to the Center. And eventually, in that very meeting, I agreed that I would come. He checked with, I guess, John Taylor probably, and found that there would be a vacancy for a student to come in around March 15 of 1961. And so, we agreed that day that I would come in and be a student.

Now, I liked the guy. It was different, you know, when I met him in person rather than hearing him on TV or radio. But, certainly nothing in my philosophy about blindness changed just in a one day, little experience here, at what was then called the Commission for the Blind, and this new training center. I still thought you got to have vision in order to be successful and happy. But, I agreed to come into the Center. I guess, I'll just go straight ahead and tell one other leap thing, and then we get...because I did come to the Center, eventually.

I had a little side track at Christmas of that year. An Aunt, it was on the Christmas of 1960, an Aunt from Montana came down. And, she started talking to me about a place in Canistota, South Dakota, where I learned later it was chiropractors, or a chiropractic clinic. And she just told me

over and over, "They can heal anything." My Aunts called me Jimmy then. So, "Jimmy, you just have to go there." And so, if I tell, if I'm talking to students I say, "So what do you suppose I did?" And most people don't know about what I might have done. But, you know, I wanted to get my sight back, heavenly days; even though I had met Kenneth Jernigan, and this dream at the Iowa Commission sounded wonderful. I went and got whatever money I had. I saved a little money; was living at home and got paid a little, this dollar an hour stuff at the creamery. So I had a little money, and got a friend of mine, who was a farm boy, to drive me in January of '61 to Canistota, and get me in there for treatment and get my sight back. The very first day I spent with the doctor and told him that it was Retinitis Pigmentosa he said, "Well, I don't think there is anything I can do, but if you want me to, I'll sure try." And of course, I wanted him to. So I stayed there a whole week, and I got treatments every day, several times a day. And, my friend and I would just go to a motel room at night and kind of hang out, and then we'd come back the next day. So the week passed, but I didn't get my sight back, and then I felt bad again. (Laughter) Strange, strange life at that time, Mary, it was. Shall I just go on?

Clarke: Yes.

Omvig: Then, that March day in 1961, I did become a student here, and literally it changed my life; absolutely and totally changed it. The first night was a little scary. The students weren't even living in the building at that time. It was still in the stage of remodeling. So I went down to the YMCA, down there on Locust, or wherever it is. Got dropped off there, and

I met two students, Neil Butler and Creig Slayton, who were the students in the Center at the time. And, they kind of had an assignment to kind of help me around, and to take care of me Sunday night, and then get me up here to the Center on Monday morning. And so, I got to know them, Creig and Neil, a little. We, ultimately, became totally fast friends forever. Neil has passed away, now, several years ago. Anyway, they took me under their wing. I didn't have a cane; never had thought of using a cane. Seemed like a horrible concept to me. It would be telling people around me gee look at me, I'm blind. (Laughter)

Clarke: I know that feeling. (Laughter)

Omvig: I bet you do; because I think every blind person I ever met, if they are honest, I think everybody has gone through that little feeling. I bought a cane.

30:00

Omvig: The very first day I got to know this guy a little better, Jim Witte. I spent a lot of time with him the first day, because he put the cane in my hand and he started to work with me about how to hold it, and how to walk around a little. And, it's weird why I would remember certain things, but sitting in his office talking with one of the other students. He has five or six students at a time. He asked another student to go around to the cafeteria, there was a little cafeteria thing in the building, to get us a cup of coffee. I thought about it, and I thought surprising he didn't go. These guys are blind and they're wearing those crazy blind folds. How are they going to go around there and get the

coffee? And then I learned later, of course, that was just a little training technique for them; something to do so they'd have success in their…In that day, it would be a helpful piece of training to go around and get us a cup of coffee. I never thought about that.

Anyway, so I got started. And, I think there would be no point in going through day by day, but I was obviously scared to death the first few days. I think in a month or two we moved into the building, so I had one of the rooms up on the sixth floor. The remodeling of that area got done, and we moved in. But I hadn't been here in more than a couple of weeks 'til I started to see, by golly, maybe there is some kind of future for me. And I got to tell you, Mary, I worked hard. I had no intention of, kind of, sloughing off while I was here. So I worked hard. The Braille we were talking about earlier, I think, off the tape. I think it was three weeks before I was going to come into the Center. My counselor, Joe Klosterman, stopped by my house and he said…

Sharon Omvig: Excuse me, but you keep saying Joe Klosterman. I have to correct you. It was Joe Balderston, probably.

Omvig: Yeah, Joe Balderston. A correction by my wife, Sharon, and I appreciate that. Yes, Balderston, I'm sorry. Joe Klosterman was the teacher at the school for the blind. So he said, "You don't know Braille do you?" No, I didn't. So he dropped off the old, what was then called the Illinois Series. It was a learn-by-yourself kind of series. So, in three weeks at home I worked really hard on that, and learned the whole Braille code. Grade one, what was then called grade one-and-a-half, and grade two; just worked at it. Now, I had

no speed to do anything, but so far as memorizing the dots and stuff, I just learned all of that in a three-week period. Later on in my professional life, it used to stun me when teachers of the blind would talk about how hard it is to learn Braille, and how long it would take. And I just knew back then. In three weeks I memorized the whole code. Now I wasn't fast at anything, but I had memorized it. So that gave me, then, an advantage as I started Braille class. I could start working on speed rather than memorizing. And, then Neil and Creig and I got a plan after activities were kind of over for the night. We had sat up in one of our rooms at 8 or 9 o'clock at night, and practiced Braille together. We all, none of us was any good at Braille. And we all wanted to be, so we started practicing Braille.

Then I started, you know, getting out on the street with that ugly, white cane; but after a couple of weeks…no frustration with being out in the public. The rule, then, was no cooking in the building at night. You go out some place and get dinner. So, we went to the restaurants around in downtown Des Moines. And it got quite common, then, to be seen by people out on the street with a white cane, and all of that frustration went away. Creig and Neil and I, then, kind of pulled another thing. When I started here as a student, there was an 8 o'clock men's gym class. So we worked out then, got dressed, and then tried to get the rest of the day going. By the time we moved into the building, we requested this little meeting with Kenneth Jernigan, and we said, "We're in the building now. How would it be if we had men's gym class at 6 o'clock in the morning? Then we could clean up and get dressed, and have breakfast and be ready to go." And he said, "That's a splendid idea. And we'll still have you start with classes at 8 o'clock in the morning,"

which we did. So we gained an hour of the day by having that men's gym class at that time. And, I know that stuck for many years. I hear that, maybe, it doesn't exist now. But much later, I came back and ran the Center for many years. And we certainly did it then. I ran the class, then, that I helped set up back in 1961.

Anyway, as we went along then I went to the National Federation of the Blind Convention in July of 1961. It was in Kansas City. And I won't go through the tumultuousness of that convention, but it was just a really difficult one. And, of course, I'm new. I didn't understand any of the background what was going on. Dr. tenBroek resigned as the national President, and John Taylor was elected. And, just a lot of stuff went on. The one thing I remember is, I don't know who he is, but there was a blind judge who spoke on one of the employment panels at the national convention. And that kind of intrigued me some.

And, then it wasn't too long after we were back at home, back to my beloved travel teacher; and he certainly was. Jim Witte said to me one day, "Have you ever thought of going to law school? I think, maybe, you can do well at that." And this little thing had been tickling me in my mind already, from hearing that judge talk down in Kansas City, and then that triggered it more. So, that started a dream of mine that, you know, here I'm the guy, you remember, Mary, who came in there thinking you got to have sight to do anything. And now I'm blind. I'm learning Braille. I'm learning travel. And frankly, learning travel quickly, and was good at it. And all of the other things we learned here. But I started in my heart and soul thinking, hey, maybe I will go to college, and then I'll go to law school. It would be a good

thing to do. So I did. Shall I just kind of keep going through this?

Clarke: Yes, you go ahead.

Omvig: So, and we had, incidentally, philosophy class. And eventually we called it Business Class. We had it the last hour of every day, back all through that period while I was a student here. We started, then, with the men's gym class at 6 in the morning and classes started at 8. And 4:30 to 5:30 was Business Class. And Manuel Urena, who was running the Center then, taught it lots of times. But also, Kenneth Jernigan would come up lots of times and run it. And he also started a grammar class at night. And we took grammar class, some of us. That was optional; anybody who wanted to take grammar. I realized later that it really was giving us another shot at philosophy from Kenneth Jernigan. So I took part in that also.

One of those nights, incidentally, as I think back on it here, he just asked me in front of the other students, "What do you think you'd like to do?" And, maybe this was before I got the idea of a lawyer, because what I answered was, "I think I'd like to get prepared and go to school and then run a training center like you're doing here. I love this idea." And then he asked me a very searching and philosophical question. He was always teaching. Every word that came out of his mouth, if you really thought about it, was teaching. And he said to me, "Do you think you want to run a training center because you really want to do it, and think you would be good at it, or do you think you might want to do this because you think you can't do something else out in competition with sighted people?" I told him I couldn't

answer the question. (Laughter) He said, "Well, then I think you better do something else." So, I think that was before the Witte thing about law school, probably, that that happened. So I did, then, later on in the summer, start thinking seriously of school and law school.

A little side trip. Sharon, who is sitting here, is my second wife. Actually, while I was a student here I started dating the typing teacher. I don't know that anybody would do anything like that these days. (Laughter) Anyway, then September of 1961 was a huge month for me. I graduated from the Center, probably too quickly, but my choice to go to college then would have been to wait clear to January, 'til the 2nd semester. And that seemed too far away, because now I was fired up and ready to go. So I got married on September 9th, and graduated, I don't know, September 10th or 11th or something, here from the Center. And started college at, oh like, September 18th or something like that at Drake. So it was a huge change. When you think about it, that I came in here in March, and my life changed so much here at this good old Iowa Commission for the Blind, that by September I'm marrying somebody. I'm graduating from the Center, and I'm starting college; just a huge leap. And as I said at the beginning, my life changed dramatically and forever, right at this building when I was here.

So I started Drake University, and frankly, worked mighty, mighty hard. I wasn't all that hot with a slate and stylus. I had learned it, but I really learned on the job, so to speak, in terms of speed, because, you know, all of the notes that I took were with a slate and stylus. Then, when I started class at Drake and I had to either not take notes or else get fast. And so, I worked really hard with the slate and stylus to get fast with my notes, and frankly, worked really,

really hard. And I kind of say that, I'm not trying to be boastful, but now I was 26-years-old and I'm married. And I got to get trained to have a life out there somewhere. So, I ended up really taking as many semester hours as they would let you take as a student at that time; for both first semester and second semester. Got down on the honor roll that second semester.

But during that time, another change in my life happened. My former wife, then, got a chance to go to Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. She was a voice major, and had a chance to get a Master's Degree there on a scholarship. And we talked about it a lot, and talked to Kenneth Jernigan about it. She needed to move. Thankfully, I could go to college anywhere. Then I just needed to go to college, was my mission. So in the summer of '62 we moved. Took, again, first, all of the possible class hours that you could take during summer school, and got as many hours as I could get here at Drake that summer of '62; then moved to Chicago. And we were poor students looking around for some little apartment. I talked to some professors that I got connected with at Drake. And I couldn't get into Northwestern. That was going to be my plan, but they had had a limit on the number of students they would permit into school. And by the time this whole plan to change life had come around, the quota was full at Northwestern. So I talked to these professors and they said, "Well, there's a campus of Loyola University at Chicago pretty close to Northwestern. And it's a great school, and you could go there." So I applied, and got accepted there. So we got an apartment a mile or so from that campus, Loyola. So I could just walk to school then from there. So, we moved to Chicago.

Now, just one little side trip; the training I got here prepared me to just go to Chicago and walk around where I wanted to go. Or even the next year, when I got into law school. I'd get on the subway and ride down town, and law school was downtown, just without a glitch, you know. Now, the person who didn't have the kind of training that we do out here, no way in the world would you say, oh, I guess I'll just go to Chicago, and I'll lead my life there; because the kind of training other centers provided didn't teach you that you could just go wherever you wanted to go. Now, through the years, much later the whole concept of what Kenneth Jernigan started here, and this was the place. But this whole concept got to be called "Structured Discovery Learning." And that's what it's still called to this day, around the country in the good training centers. And there was no word like that back then.

So, went to Chicago and had one year in that undergraduate school. And at that time, Loyola Law School would let you in if you had 90 semester hours completed, and your major completed. You could get into law school without having an undergraduate degree.

45:00

Omvig: And then, the theory was your first year of law school would count as electives, and you'd go back and get your…that would count, and then you could get your undergraduate degree. So I started at Loyola, and just walked over there, and I never had learned the campus. I, frankly, went over a few days before classes started and just walked around and got familiar with the different buildings and areas, so that when classes really started, I

could just go over there and go to class like everybody else. And if I needed to ask a question, I'd ask; although, new students who were sighted probably were as confused as me about where things were. (Laughter) Anyway, because of the training I got here it was easy; never really gave it a thought.

Clarke: Did you have, did you get any resistance from law school, as far as entering law school?

Omvig: Yes, I did from law school. Not undergraduate school; no sweat, they took me in. But then law school came and, again, there's a story to tell. So, I applied to Loyola Law School. Two things were involved. One is applying to the law school. The second, even back at that time, there was a test called the LSAT (Law School Aptitude Test). So, what do you know the school guys were dealing with me fine, until the people who administered that test said, "Well, blind people aren't permitted to take this LSAT; you can't take it," which meant that I also could not enter law school. And this was a humungous frustration; right in the middle of all of this very fast-track plan that I was doing. So I talked to Kenneth Jernigan and, you know, flat out discrimination. I had learned about discrimination while I was a student here; what it is, and how to deal with it the best that you can. We talked about the possibility of suing the school, but Jernigan had been around long enough to know that that might mean that two, or three, or four, or five years of my life could be wasted while we were fiddling around with the law suit. So he said, "Why don't you just go off and seek an appointment with the Dean of the law school, and see if you can't talk yourself in; make some other arrangement." And so, I did

talk to the Dean and he understood. And he didn't like the fact that the LSAT people would not let a blind person do that. Now, Loyola Law School had never had a blind student before, so I was going to be the first. But he talked to me, and was trying to figure out, and he was willing. I got to give the guy credit, Dean Purcell, was his name. And he wanted to try to figure out, well, let's work out something. And I don't know who he went to, to discuss, whether he had some board or something. But he got back to me, and said, first of all, I had given him all of my recommendation letters and my grade records. And they were all very good and positive. So, he gave me some kind of writing assignment. And I, frankly, totally forget what it was, but he said, "If you write me a paper on this topic, I want to see how you can write and think. And what we'll do is just substitute that for the LSAT, and get you into this school without taking the LSAT at all." So I went home and worked my heart out on this paper. I can't remember; I had three days or a week, or something, to do it. I wrote the paper and, obviously, it made the Dean happy enough, because he said, "Fine! I'm really quite happy, so let's get you into this school." And through the summer of '62 I was taking all of my classes in summer school at undergraduate at Loyola, so I could end up...I was now going to end up with my 90 hours undergraduate, and my major completed, which was Political Science. And so, he was willing to let me in. And so I started in.

So, now think of the change. I came here in March of '61, thinking life was over. By now, September of '63, I'm married; I'm in Chicago; I've not completed undergraduate school, but I have 90 semester hours finished; and I'm entering law school. So two years, and three or four months

later, as I told you, my life's totally changed here at this very place. So, now I enter law school.

Well, I should tell you; we'll back track here a week or so before I went down to, it was downtown. And I lived up by Northwestern, so it was a subway ride downtown. I went down to kind of learn my way around, and practice a little, and look around a little at a subway. I'd never been in one before. But I also had a meeting with my advisor, a guy named Alfred Cayman, who became my later law professor. He said two things. One, "You know, you're the first blind student we ever had here, but we're all going to be kind of learning as we go," but, he said, "We're going to let you in the school. It will be up to you to figure out how to do it. We don't know anything about what we would need to do for you to accommodate you, and we don't think that we should anyway; that's your job. We'll let you into school." And, of course, I had come out of the Iowa School for the, I mean, this Commission for the Blind, here, and I said, "Well, of course I don't want any special treatment. I want you just to let me in school, and that's great." Then he said, somewhere in this conversation, "Now, you should know that beginning with this class, we've decided as a law school to just improve the caliber of attorneys coming out of this school. So beginning with your class, we're going to make this school so difficult for students that, frankly, I don't know how anybody is going to get through; whether you have sight or whether you don't," which, of course, frankly, scared the tar out of me. (Laughter) I'm not sure that that was a good thing, although, maybe he knew what he was doing. Maybe he wanted to scare me, I'm not sure; but he sure did. So I started...

Well, I'm going to go back, one thing, just again, to talk about this Iowa Commission for the Blind; now the Iowa Department for the Blind. I guess, I assume, it's in the history already here. But, Kenneth Jernigan also, we got this huge building bought in 1959. And he said, "Well, I got space for a library here." So he had worked with the Library of Congress system in dealing with libraries for the blind, to establish a library for the blind in Iowa. They used to get service before that from the Illinois Library. So by the time I was a student here, we had the Iowa Library. And this zipping, powerful lady named Florence Grannis, who was running the library. And between the two of them, they had started a volunteer taping system, and a volunteer Brailling system; in addition to just general library service. So I tell you all of this, because Florence Grannis used to be so proud about talking how they, the Iowa library, got Jim Omvig through graduate school and through law school; because when I needed things taped, and I worked at it hard to go to the professors early and say, "What book are we going to need?" And I would buy it early and zip it over to the Iowa library, and then I would have taped books, or certain books would be Brailled if I needed something in Braille. And so, I don't think any other blind student in the country from any other state would have had the opportunity I had. And again, it was because of the Iowa Commission for the Blind, and Kenneth Jernigan, and Florence Grannis that I had tapes of the books that I needed. In addition, of course, they bought me a tape recorder. And this was back in the day of big, old open reel tapes, which some young people of today might not know about. But anyway, they existed.

So, throughout graduate school I had to have a tremendous amount of tape books. And then once I got into

law school, I had tape books; although, certain ones were not suitable for taping certain classes. An assignment on a particular day would be, read such and such cases. And there was no question of going to read a book, so the Commission also provided me funds with which to hire readers to deal with that; and had done it when I was here at Drake, and then in Loyola undergraduate school, also. So, I'd become quite accustomed to working with readers. I had become quite accustomed to working with readers in law school. And I also developed another technique; that I called back to Kenneth Jernigan at one point, and or Manuel, whatever, said, "You need to be teaching this to other students." When I got into a lot at Drake, it was quite common the old blackboards didn't exist anymore, except professors were still writing stuff up on blackboards, or flow charts, and then the students were copying the notes. And the same thing would happen in law school. It occurred to me one day what if I would take, I don't know if that exists now, but come on, Sharon, you got to help me, what's the copy paper called?

Clarke: Carbon paper.

Omvig: Carbon paper, yeah. What would happen if I carried; I have a brief case I carried every day. What would happen if I carried a bunch of carbon paper with me, and then as I would sit down in class and be next to a student, ask the student, "When you're taking your notes, would you mind sticking a piece of carbon paper in here? You know, I'll give you the blank paper and I'll carry it with me. You just stick it in there and I could get a copy of your notes." And so I did that, in addition to taking my notes with a slate and stylus.

And that really worked. Some students, of course, took better than others; it depended on who I sat next to, but it really helped, because then I was also getting faster and faster on the slate and stylus. But I also, then, had somebody else's notes to be working with. And then studying with readers and stuff for tests and things. Anyway, so the tapes were enormously helpful to me.

When I got, particularly, into law school; law school was scary in that first year. I thought I worked hard enough in undergraduate school, and then I found that usually we were reading as much in one day to prepare for class for the next day that I had, maybe, read in a week in undergraduate school. And this was, I had heard about how hard law school could be, and it was. And, man, the hours that I put in. And God bless those tapes, because I learned to speed up the tape and run really fast. And then I also took notes, incidentally, from the tapes. I took slate and stylus notes, because there would be no way ever to go back and read the book again; that simply wouldn't work. So in law school then, I ended up with two sets of notes; my class notes that I took in class, and then the notes that I took from the tape of the book. And then when it came time to study, pulled all of that stuff together.

In the middle of that freshman year, just one thing that is fun to talk about, I still was...This was pressure, and I was scared and worked hard and read. And, you know, I did fine. In the middle of the first year, there was going to be a practice test, so we would know what a law school test was going to be like. And Loyola did it differently from any law school that I ever heard of then, or since. Usually, in undergraduate school you're going to have testing for several days. And so, today is a test in something, and

tomorrow is something else. And you know ahead of time, so you can study for a specific class. They told us, "Now, what we're going to do is have testing like a Bar Exam, which means you come in and you can have questions any day from any class. And nobody's going to tell you what class the questions are from." As a lawyer, you got to be able to figure out what the issues are, so you come in and you just; here's a set of questions and you got to figure out what class they would relate to, and write your answer. And they were all essay answers. And write those accordingly. A wonderful reader at the time that I was in law school, it was amazing that she just, well, she could really read fast. So between the tapes and whatever, I studied. But when the time that this practice test was coming, frankly, I was petrified that I was going to just flunk the whole thing, and wouldn't succeed. And, then this little funny twist I wanted to tell you about. I came into the coffee room; we had a room where everybody kind of gathered and sat around, and studied and talked, and just a general meeting room between classes. I was standing at the coffee machine, and by this time I had a little team of four or five buddies. And, we all kind of got together and studied together, and talked together sometimes.

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Omvig: So, I heard one of them explaining why it was she was going to flunk out of school. She was too old. And she was in her early 30s, and so she had been out of school for, you know, ten years and unaccustomed to studying. And pretty soon it got clear that she was talking about how she wasn't going to succeed. Then another of my buddies picked

up on it. Well, he didn't read enough in undergraduate school; and the third one. I finally just stood at the coffee machine, and was listening to them. And, the third one was explaining that he had gone to a school that was hard enough in undergraduate school. And I realized, here I was thinking blindness was going to keep me from succeeding in this school. They all were dreaming of reasons why they were going to flunk out. So, that frankly, Mary, helped to change my thinking about the whole school, and whether I could succeed or not. I, frankly, started working harder on the practice test. I survived. Well, and the test we only had is to settle me in. And school got going. Then, Loyola school only had two tests each year. They had a test at the first semester, at the end of the first semester, to cover all the classes for the first semester. And they had a test at the end of the year that covered all the classes for the whole year. And there was a week of tests; and you just walked in and got your set of tests. They are going to take you a day. And you start to read and figure out what classes they are. And it was quite interesting; some students started to peel off. By this time, they had started Loyola as a day school and a night school. The day school started with 126 students. And when we graduated in June of '66, there were 26 of us left.

Clarke: Oh my gosh!

Omvig: The attrition rate was tough. If you flunked out; most people just quit. They thought, "Why am I enrolled in this?" I hung in there, and happily. It was for, I said 26; it was 36 that graduated in 1966. Happily, I was one of those. So it went. I worked hard and had a great time, once I really settled in and understood I can do this. And for any blind

person, that's what you've got to ultimately come to and understand. I can do this. And my philosophy, now, had changed, Mary, from that day of thinking that you had to have sight in order to succeed. Now, I knew I could succeed with no sight period. It didn't make any difference. Then I had the one more, well, I suppose I've had many frustrations in my life. But, one more really big frustration, and that was job time.

I started probably in the fall of, I suppose, 1965. Law school, or law firms, started to send recruiters to the law school. And I suppose they went to all of the law schools, so there was a week when there were going to be recruiters there. And so, you'd go and interview. And they were looking for people to hire to work in their big Chicago law firms. I signed up and went to a bunch of those. An interesting question for a blind person that came up to me, then, and it still comes up to blind people, and I'd be curious. I'll talk to the students later today to see how they would deal with it in 2011. The question was, if you signed up for an interview, do you tell people in advance that you are blind and scare the heck out of them that way, and get them prepared to almost block you out before you ever come in; or do you walk in as a blind person and shock them then? (Laughter) So I tried it both ways; neither was successful. Nobody offered me a job. So I tried it both ways; didn't get a job. Then I started interviewing with Illinois state agencies. Didn't get any offers. There weren't any blind attorneys working around at that time. Then I started, and again, the Iowa Commission for the Blind; in fact, this agency was hugely supporting of me, time to, maybe, to apply for some federal jobs. And so, whoever my Counselor was then, and I don't remember, said, "You know, the Commission for the

Blind can pay if you need to travel to Washington D.C. to do interviews. We can pay for that;" which was just tremendous.

Also, sliding back, one thing, is the Commission did an unusual thing earlier during that fall of 1963. When I was starting in law school, my advisor during that scary interview said, "Oh, incidentally men students here wear suits and ties every day, or a sport coat and a tie and a dress shirt. Women dress accordingly in, you know, women's suits and dresses and whatever." So, I didn't have very many suits as a poor young college student. So by grab, if the Iowa Commission for the Blind didn't buy me, give me money to buy two or three suits, and sport coats, and ties and shirts, so that I could dress appropriately during law school. So, we dressed like professionals every day. I don't think schools do that at all anymore now. In fact, I'm not sure that the lawyers in their offices even dress in a suit and tie now. I'm wearing one today, just for the heck of it; coming back to the place that gave me my life.

So let's see, oh, I was getting up to job time. So I had several interviews. Then my Labor Law professor, this guy had taken several courses, and really majored in Labor Law. He said, "Look what you need to do, really, is work for a federal agency called the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). It's the federal agency which deals with the rights of people to unionize. It's separate from the U.S. Department of Labor, which deals with wages and working hours, and all of that kind of stuff. The NLRB deals with the employee rights." And so, he wrote a wonderful recommendation to me there. So I went to Washington, D.C. I had several interviews. In fact, Kenneth Jernigan had, at that time, Sergeant Shriver, of the Kennedy family, had been trying to recruit Kenneth

Jernigan to work in one of the regional offices of this new, big war on poverty that had come along in 1964 and '65 out of the Kennedy administration. And they, people somewhere through the politicians of Iowa, at this time, Kenneth Jernigan was a hero in the state of Iowa; and was probably better known than the governor of the state, I suspect. He went all over the state and spoke at Lions clubs and ladies clubs. And by that time he was a hugely known beloved entity in the state of Iowa. So, Sergeant Shriver had tried to get him to run the Mid-West Regional Office of this new war on poverty. And Jernigan turned him down. He came to Iowa on a mission. And, that was to show the proper training for blind people to produce enormous successful results. So he was here on, what he called the "Iowa Experiment," as you and me have already talked about, here. So he turned it down, but he gave me the name and phone number of Sergeant Shriver, and he said, "You're going to go to Washington. Why don't you call the guy up and get an interview? Maybe he would hire you." So one night, it was like at 6 o'clock at night. I was quite surprised old Sergeant Shriver himself was willing to interview me. But here I have, of course, no experience. I am not Kenneth Jernigan. I'm a guy in law school with no working experience. In fact, even back then as a law student, you didn't go out in the summers and intern in law firms. That mostly happens in law schools around the country now; it didn't back then. So, I had no experience in the world. So, I had a wonderful interview with Sergeant Shriver, but at the end of it he said, "Well, I'm sorry. But once you get more experience, you could come back to me again. But we need you to, kind of, have a little experience under your belt," because what he was looking for was people to run this new war on poverty. I was not a

qualified candidate, so there was no issue of discrimination, here.

Probably the major, well, two issues that really dealt with total, flat out, straight discrimination against the blind. First, was with the Securities and Exchange Commission. That was one of the interviews that I got. I had a whole bunch of interviews lined up in Washington when I went there. One of them was the Securities and Exchange Commission. And I forget the guy's name. I think he was head of the whole personnel thing. After we talked, and I showed him all my papers and we interviewed, he said, "Well, I'm really sorry but we hired a blind attorney once here, about 15-years ago and it just didn't work out. And so, I'm really sorry, but we can't hire you." Now, to the observer who's hearing that, that's where we get into the business of blind people being a minority. In the same way black people are, or Hispanics, or women, or whatever else; so people in the public…you get this attitude if one blind person can't succeed then, certainly, no blind person could, because you know, after all, we're all alike. We can't do anything. So I argued, frankly, vehemently with this fellow, and tried, kept saying, "Look, just look at my resume. Look at my record. Look at this recommendation or these letters." I had several professors write for me and, "Look at these. You don't need to judge me by that fellow who didn't succeed. Apparently, he wasn't competent, and fine, he's gone. But that's got nothing to do with me." The guy ended up just, "No way." Oh, as I was going to leave; this was right at the time when the black civil rights movement was getting really active, and there had been fires in Detroit and in Los Angeles, and one area in Washington, D.C. The whole civil rights movement had erupted in America at that time. And it was kind of my

parting shot to this fellow. I said, "What do you think would happen if a black attorney applied here today, and you actually ended up by saying, oh, I'm sorry, but we hired a black attorney once and it didn't work out. So we're not going to hire you?" And he got mighty angry, Mary, and banged his fist on the table, and said, "That's different!" So I explained to him how it was no different at all, and that we were talking here about just flat out discrimination against the blind, which made him angrier. There was no other sighted person in the room. And I suspect that his face was mighty red, because he was a blazing, angry man by the time that I left.

Clarke: Underneath he knew he was wrong.

Omvig: Yeah, he knew he was wrong. And so I went. Along that way, I interviewed, also, on that trip then, with the National Labor Relations Board, which is the labor agency. And I had what seemed to be a positive interview. A lot of times, of course, and blind people have experienced this through the years; that nobody would include anything during an interview, just end up by saying, well, you know, you'll hear from us. And your application is actively being considered, and you leave. And you might get a letter saying, sorry, we can't use you. Or you might never hear anything. So it went. So the Labor Board, I had that interview and it went well, but then I heard nothing for a long time. And like, maybe, five or six weeks, and my Labor Law professor finally wrote to the head of the National Labor Relations Board. And the professor shared his letter with me, and told me about it. And, wrote to find out what was happening with my application. And the day that he got a

response, he called me up. And I can't use on this tape the language that he used. He was an old mining lawyer. But he was mighty angry, because the letter had said they were sorry; from the head of the agency, this letter came back. He was really sorry. He knew this professor, Al Cayman, and said, you know, "Professor Cayman, the young gentleman did a fine interview, but we just can't conceive of how a blind person could do the kind of job that we have around here. We've never had a blind attorney here. So, sorry, but we're just going to have to turn him down." And, Cayman was angry. He said to me, "How many copies do you want of that letter? We got to sue the"...whatever.

1:15:00

Omvig: So, again I called up Jernigan, and I called up...and well, he talked to Dr. Jacobus tenBroek, who was still alive then, in the National Federation of the Blind, about what to do. And there was a representative, at that time, of the National Federation of the Blind, named John Nagle. He went over and he talked to this guy. And we got nowhere. So then we were still talking law suit, because now, you know, it's time. I've got to get a job. I'm soon going to be graduating. I've got no job, no prospect for a job. I was playing piano in Chicago, and was making some money at nights and on weekends, but had no job in the offering, and just needed to get something figured out. So about the time that we were seriously, we, Kenneth Jernigan and the National Federation of the Blind, were sort of talking about a law suit, maybe. A crazy thing happened. This labor professor called me up, and I was talking to him personally every day. And he said, "Look, don't do anything. I'm going to

London, to a labor law conference;" right just, I think it was the last week in June, probably, two weeks before the law school was going to get out. And he said, "I've been planning to go there, but I just got a copy of the list of the attendees." And Mr. Arnold Ordman, who was the head of the National Labor Relations Board in the U.S., was going to also be there. And he said, "Don't stir up anything right now. Don't do anything. Let me talk to Ordman." And, by golly, when my professor got back he said, "You think you could swing another trip to Washington and just go see Ordman personally?" And, I said I thought I could. And I called up, of course, Kenneth Jernigan, and said, "Can the Commission pay for another trip for me to go to Washington?" And yes, it could. So took my trip; went to Washington and saw the head honcho personally. And we talked, and had a very congenial conversation. He didn't know that I knew anything about the letter that he had written, so he was just so cordial and friendly. And he called down to, they had a personnel guy named Anderson. He called down and said, "Mr. Anderson, I've got this law school graduate, Mr. Omvig, here and I am sure we have a place for him in this agency. I'm going to send him down to see you." And bang, bang, bang. So Ordman didn't; I didn't talk about the letter; he didn't talk about the letter. I went back to personnel and they said, "Okay, we're going to hire you," but not that job I wanted. I had wanted to have a job out with people in court rooms and, you know, investigating cases and all of that stuff. The job I got offered was at headquarters in Washington, D.C. doing writing and research. But it was a job, so I figured, okay I better take it.

Then an interesting thing happened, and I'll talk about this a little later on. A time gap then happens here. So this

was either the last week in May, or first week in June; I'm not sure which. And I am going to get a job, but I kept not getting any starting date; and didn't get the starting date until, oh, the middle of September. I got asked if I could be into Washington by, I think, it was September third. And so, we did; I mean, October third. So, we did a real hurry-up thing. There's a reason for all of that that I'll get into later, anyway.

So graduation came, and oh man, I'll tell you, what a glorious day! The feeling that came that day, wearing that big cap and gown, and graduation of Loyola was at, what is, was, then, I assume, it still is in Chicago, McCormick Place. It's a great, huge hall, because this was a graduation not only of law students, but all of the Loyola students. And my family and all kinds of friends, and relatives came in there, and we had a big bash. And, I walked across the stage. The thing had been, hold the applause until everybody's across, and then after everybody. So, I start going across the stage with my white cane across there to go over to get my diploma, and just a tremendous ovation happens, because an audience sees a blind guy walking across there. And so, people stood. I learned from my family, then, people stood up and cheered and clapped; and it was so thunderous that I had a heck of a time figuring out exactly where I was caning to, to meet the guy who was handing me my diploma. But I got there; which, again, a person without our kind of training would have been led across the stage by somebody. It would have been a whole different event. It was a heck of an event. And just for fun, and as a little aside, Loyola was also giving an honorary Doctorate that day to the old, long-time Mayor of Chicago; Mayor Daley. So, I got a chance to meet Mayor Daley. He was one of the people shaking hands with

those of us who were the graduates. So it was just, oh, the feeling of happiness and joy, and the success, Mary. I know in your own life, you had that same kind of feeling; when you really hit the end of some big trail.

Clarke: That's right; that's right.

Omvig: It is an enormous thing. And so, that was a huge celebration time for my family. Then I kept waiting. I started playing the piano then. And also I had to take a Bar review course then, because now the next hurdle is to pass the Illinois Bar Exam; because it's lovely to graduate from law school, but if you don't pass a Bar Exam, then you're not going to do anything anyway. So, that was the next hurdle in front. That was going to be in August of 1966, then. So now, just to recap it; I came into this building as a student in March of '61, and now in June of '66 I've walked across the stage as a law school graduate.

One interesting thing happened that I forgot to tell. I never did get an undergraduate degree, because some of the classes that I had taken earlier didn't transfer to Loyola. So, I'm an interesting character. I've got my Doctor of Jurist Prudence Degree, but I don't have any undergraduate degree. I've got hours, but the classes that Loyola needed just something from Drake, I can't remember, a couple of classes didn't transfer somehow.

So anyway, so I've got the Doctor of Jurist Prudence Degree. Started law school, preparing then, for the bar exam. It was going to be in August. And there was a six-week's Bar review course that I could take. And, God bless the old Iowa Commission for the Blind. It paid the one hundred fifty bucks, or whatever, to take the class to study

for the Bar Exam. And that was, I think, it was like 4, no, 2 o'clock in the afternoon 'til 8; five days a week for six weeks. And now, what you're doing is going back and reviewing everything that you had learned in the six weeks of law school, I mean, the years; what you're studying for in six weeks, the three years of law school. Anyway, so then I was...also I needed money.

Oh, another thing happened then. I became a father. So I get out of law school. It was somewhere around June 15th, I guess, June 15 of '66, then, is law school graduation. July 30, my son, Jamey; he's James Harlan Omvig the second, but we call him Jamey. But anyway, he was born.

And so, I was studying for the Bar five days a week, playing piano seven nights a week, in order to try and get money to pay for some things. My first wife, Janice, was also dealing with being a student, and she was working part-time. Between the two of us, we just scratched along. And we're making it.

Oh, just so the whole record is complete, I also, then, had Social security Disability Insurance. During that period, John Taylor got me on to that. I didn't ever know about such a thing, but, here again, the Iowa Commission for the Blind came into play and helped me. I had worked enough quarters at the creamery in Slater that I would qualify for disability insurance. I forget what I got as a check. It was not very much, but it certainly helped. And so, then my money, piano playing, and Janice working in a grocery store part time; we were existing. Then the new little baby came along. She couldn't work then for a while, but we survived.

I'll never forget, we had lined it up with one of my law school friends, the name may come up one more time, a friend named Jerry Rore. He was in the class, a sighted guy

with a car. So he was going to be the driver, to drive us to the hospital when delivery time came. So I was playing piano in a club between Chicago and Evanston, when I got a call. The bar owner, or the club owner, knew this was going to happen. I got a call about 11 o'clock at night that my wife had gone into labor, and had been taken to the hospital by my law school buddy, Jerry. So I think I played 'til midnight, and then I took a taxi down to the hospital and stayed there through the night. My son was born sometime around 5 o'clock in the morning, or something.

There's another, just little fascinating story with that; that deals with blindness in a very positive sense. I was sitting in the waiting room with, I don't know, five or six, or seven other potential fathers; waiting for our babies. It was a big hospital. I don't know if there's any purpose to put it in, but I will; North West Hospital of Chicago, my son was born. And I'm sitting there, and finally I get the word that the baby is delivered, and he is a boy. Back in that era you didn't know ahead of time whether it was going to be a boy or a girl. You just knew you were having a baby, and hoping everything would come out well. And then a tremendously positive thing happened. A nurse came out. You know, the other sighted guys, when their baby delivered, would be delivered, they'd get to go in and look through a window at their baby laying in a bed there. And so, a nurse came out and said, "These other guys are having a chance to see their babies when they're born. Do you want to see your baby?" And I said, "Absolutely, I want to see my baby." So she brought me a gown and a mask, whatever you call it, to put on, and gloves of some sort. And she said, "Come along," and I went right into a room where the brand new baby was. And, she brought him to me and let me hold him. And, you

know, I checked around. Mostly, I was interested; I checked to see if all of his fingers and his toes. But, so, I'm a brand new father. Now, there's another. I talked about the tremendous elation going across that stage and getting my diploma; graduating from law school. Another one was holding that baby for the first time and, I guess, parents mostly always experience that. You know a baby is coming, and all of a sudden you actually have this new little human being in your arms. And, my goodness, what a feeling sweeps through the body! It's just an enormous thing! And I'll never forget that that nurse did that, because I think most nurses, it wouldn't have occurred to them. Well, he's a blind guy. Let's let him come in there, somehow, and look at this baby. So, that was just a tremendous experience that happened to me when my son was born then.

I kept playing the piano. I took the Bar and, oh, the panic again; when you came in to deal with this Bar review course and finish it. Then, toward the end of August came the Illinois Bar Exam. And then I had a very annoying situation again. I assumed that I could bring my own reader. This lady I had talked to about it, was a tremendous reader, and a tremendous writer for me. All of the exams at law school were written out; long exams. And so, I would dictate stuff. And she was very good at taking my dictation, and being a very fast reader.

1:30:00

Omvig: So, I just assumed that I would use my reader when I came to the Bar Exam. So, about a week ahead of time I talked to somebody over there; planning, just assumed, that yes, I would do this because, again, they probably never had

a blind person take that Bar Exam before. And then I got another shocker. They said, "No, we're sorry you can't bring your own reader. We will provide a reader." And again I argued and protested and got nowhere. And I argued, "Look, if you want; if you're concerned that somehow I'm going to cheat, then put a monitor, the person you would put in here as a reader for me, put that person in the room to make sure that I'm the one taking the test, not my reader; if you really have a concern about that." And they just, absolutely, would not do that. And, that was an accommodation thing for blind people that was a problem for a long time. Only now, are we getting that kind of stuff solved; we, the National Federation of the Blind.

Anyway, so I had to take the Bar Exam. It was a five-day, no three-day, I think, all day exam with somebody I had never met before. This was not to knock old people, but this was a nice, kindly, old gentleman, who could not read very fast. And then who also would get very dry in the throat and so he'd say, "Excuse me," and he'd go off to a drinking fountain to get himself a drink of water. And here I'm sitting on a timed test, and worrying every minute, can I get this doggone thing done? And, you know, I didn't think, and he didn't think, I guess, to get him a doggone glass of water when we were taking the test. So anyway, he was my reader. I made it in all of the timed periods. Each segment had this time. And you could get a break to get a drink and go to the bathroom, and be scared all over again for the next two or three-hour segment, whatever it was. Anyway, that went on for three days. And that was some time toward the end of August.

Then I got a brand new baby. I'm done with law school study; now I'm just waiting. So here my wife isn't working,

and we don't have all that much money. When am I going to get to start that job in Washington, D.C.? And it went on and on. So finally it was, I think, in the middle of September that we got the word that I'd been approved and accepted, and that I would start working in Chicago, excuse me, in Washington, D.C. on, I guess, October third, I think, it was of 1966. So I had a good friend, the woman who had been my tremendous reader in law school. Her husband had been in medical school at the same time, and in fact, we played in bands together sometimes. He, now, also got a job in Washington, D.C. with some big medical agency. I forget what it was. So here they moved; I moved, and what do you know, doggone it, this lady that was my reader in law school now could do some reading for me in Washington, D.C. as I started on this new job.

Basically, what the job turned out to be, in the beginning, what is called digesting of cases. And I'll explain. That was done where a lawyer who's doing legal research and wants to find cases that would be Precedent for the case which he or her is working on. You can't take time to read every case in its whole content; you got to have some way of looking at a summary of it, and then deciding, okay, this sounds important enough that I'd better read this. So somebody had to write those summaries. They're called digests. And that's what I got assigned to do with, I think, four other brand new guys out of law school. And so, again, I had to have a really fast reader. This lady's name was Mary, incidentally as I think of it here, Mary, Mary Tonne.

Incidentally, just for the person who is going to transcribe this, Omvig is O-M, like Mary, V like victory, I-G, like George. I probably should have said that in the beginning.

So I started and, of course, it was scary as could be in the beginning. I worked like the devil. We found a little apartment out in Maryland outside. It was really costly at that time, relatively speaking, to live in Washington, D.C. itself. So we lived out in a little Maryland suburb called Oxon Hill, Maryland. And I started by riding the bus. And again, this Des Moines, Iowa travel training did me well; to be able just to go in my neighborhood, get on the bus right to down town Washington, D.C. and walk to 1717. What the heck! All of a sudden I can't say the street that the White House is on; Pennsylvania Avenue. My office was just a block down from the White House. It's at 1600 Pennsylvania. And we were 1717, just down in the next block; so no sweat. Walk down there, and what do you... who cares where you travel if you've learned to travel properly. So that part of it was easy. Getting a handle on reading really rapidly and digesting these cases, that took some work. We had the apartment. I took the bus into Washington; got the brand new baby.

Incidentally, just for fun, I'll put in here salaries are relative. I guess, I started that job for six-thousand-four-hundred dollars a year; was just astounding. So that's 1966 wages. I don't know how that would relate, I suppose, somewhere in the forty, forty-five-thousand or something. Today, I'm not sure how that would relate, but anyway, it started fairly low, although, an interesting thing happened. I started at, what the feds call, GS7 was the rating. And I hadn't been there more than about two months, and the federal government decided that no longer would federal attorneys start working at a GS7 level. They would all start working at a GS9 working level. And so, to be fair to those of us who had just been hired, they said, "Okay, those of you who started at a seven, we'll move you up to a nine." So I

think I had only been there two months and I got my first raise, which was tremendous.

Anyway, once I got a handle on what I was doing, I would have this friend of mine, Mary, come in, and I would get assigned cases to write summaries for by my boss. And so, I'd get a bunch of them and have her come in and read, maybe, for a whole day. She was also doing other things, like where they had just moved to Washington. But she did have the time to come. She could read faster than the devil out loud. And so, I would have her read a whole tape of, well, just a day of, cases. Then, using that tape, I would go back and just again, to show how, what I had to do then as a blind person, too. The sighted guys read their cases, summarized and worked just in long hand, and then handed them in. When they got what they thought was a good summary of the case, then they would hand it into a secretarial pool and then they got typed. This was before computers, for people who would be looking at this. So, there was the secretarial pool of people who did the typing. And so, they didn't have to worry about the finals, but I still typed as part of my operation. What I did, then, as I summarized, would be to take Braille notes as I would listen back to the tape of my friend, Mary, reading so rapidly. When my boss or some other colleagues would come in, they would stand there and listen, and be marveling, because they couldn't even comprehend what she was reading. It was so fast that she can read, but it was interesting. So, I summarized away. And then, again, as now had been my custom, you know, if they weren't going to hire me at all; and now they did. So I had something to prove. That was, that they had made a good decision. So, frankly, I worked like the devil; just worked

really hard. Never did take a coffee break; didn't take a lunch break.

In fact, in the summer time or in warm weather, at least, those three or four buddies, where we all came on essentially at the same time; we all brought lunches from home. We couldn't afford to go out to lunch, so we brought lunches from home. And then it was just a block down to the park that's right across from the White House. Somewhere along the way I'll think of the name of that park. But anyway, we would go down there and sit on park benches and have lunch and chat and yak. And, eventually, we started playing cards at noon time. There's an old picture of me around here some place playing cards with some of my colleagues at the National Labor Relations Board. And there's a picture in one of the annual reports of me, I guess, playing cards, and then also just walking with my cane to the whole building. And some of the people at the Labor Board were quite concerned if I send to Iowa a picture of us playing cards. (Laughter) They would think that that's all their employees do, and that we don't work there very much. But we did that. And we had an hour for lunch, so we did that for noon hour. But I also worked hard, hard, hard, like I said.

And then again, just a fun thing that was interesting. I started producing much more. We'd have a weekly staff meeting, and the boss would go over the cases we had produced. And, it would turn out every week that Jim Omvig had produced more final product than these other three or four lawyers who had come on the staff. And it was quite a thing, Mary. One day they actually came to me and asked me if I would be willing to slow down. They said, you know, "You're making us look bad. We're sighted and you are the blind person here, and you're producing more than we are.

And, it's making us look bad." And I teased with them a while. And they were friends, and I said, "Here's the trouble, and you guys contemplate it."

1:45:00

Omvig: "I wasn't going to be hired here at all, and then I was. And it was just a tremendous thing that I got hired here. I'm the first blind attorney that's ever been here, so I have to prove something; but not only about me. I have to prove that, in general, blind people can be competent. I'm here not only for my own purposes, but also to demonstrate that blind people can work in this federal agency, or in others. And so, I understand what you guys are saying. My advice to you would be for you to work faster, because I can't slow down." (Laughter) And they understood. And we still stayed friends. And so, I did that for a year, and then Washington…but. Well, two things were happening. My wife, of course, was aspiring to get off to Broadway, and to be making it as an operatic singer. I was concerned to get in court rooms. And here I'm sitting in the back room in Washington, doing all this writing stuff. And then I'd get special research assignments, also, that I did. And that was all peachy. I started; there were even little…There was an agency magazine, and there were a couple of little articles about me and, you know, I was the big success story of the place. And that was fun. I'd seen my old pal, Arnold Ordman, the Chief Council of the place, on the elevator once in a while. And, why, he had now become my buddy, and it was quite something, you know. But I had the itch to get into working with people and court rooms; that's why I had gone to law school.

So I did start looking at vacancies, and would look specifically in the New York City area, since that could give my wife the chance to get moving and singing in New York. And she was singing some in Washington. There was a big restaurant that hired, at that time, operatic type singers to sing at the dinner hours. So she had some work as a singer there, and that was working. But finally, after about a year, I saw a vacancy in Brooklyn, New York. So I applied for it, and got rejected as you would expect. They didn't say it, but obviously it was on the basis of blindness. So I trotted right up to my good old pal, Arnold Ordman, was on the top floor of our building, I forget, 15th story or something. He had his big suite of offices up there. So I went up and talked to him about it. He agreed to do a thing. He said the feds have what is called a detail, where you can have an assignment in one place, but go and work in another place, on what is called a detail; just a temporary assignment. He said, "Look, what I could do, we'll keep your assignment here in Washington, D.C. but I will send you to Brooklyn on a detail. And then it's going to be up to you to prove whether you, as a blind person, can do that job that a field attorney does out there. You're investigating actual unfair labor practice cases. You're trying cases. You're working as an agency hearing officer, all kinds of things. If you're willing to go up there on a temporary basis, just to prove that you can do it. I'll assign you there." And we talked about it, my wife and I talked about it. That's a very uncomfortable way to take a job, I've got to say. (Laughter) But anyway, I wanted to get in the court room, and she wanted to sing. And so, we talked about it. And Arnold Ordman, then the boss, lined it up with what was called, the Regional Director, in Brooklyn, New York, of

the National Labor Relations Board, have me come up there for a six-month temporary assignment.

So we went off to New York City. We stayed in, the first little while we stayed in a hotel, up in Manhattan. And then my office was down in Brooklyn. So, I got my experience learning the New York subway system and traveling around. But got down there, I think, fairly quickly. It got clear that the boss guy wasn't excited about this business. He had to be the one to decide, yes, this blind person can handle this job, or not. Eventually, after a month or so, it got clear that they were at least going to be happy enough to have me around, that we would stay the six months. So we went out and hunted, and found an apartment right close to my Brooklyn office. We were living in an area called Brooklyn Heights. New York had, then, and I think still has, certain areas that have rent controlled apartments. You know, here I am at this humungous salary. I guess by that time, it was up to eight or nine-thousand a year; but we got this new baby. And so, I got the job, though, or we went off and got an apartment then. Just like four blocks or five from the Regional Office in Brooklyn. So, that was a really neat thing that made my traveling easier. So that started easily.

Pretty soon my supervisor, not the regional director himself, but my supervisor was a really good guy. Just immediately started giving me real assignments; what real lawyers do. And also I shared an office with an office mate who was fairly new. And he was totally into this business of having a blind person work in the office. And so, between the two of them, just within a few weeks, I actually started getting clients; it was interesting. They would come to the regional office to meet somebody who was going to take their statement, and investigate their case. And I'd walk out

to the desk, and they'd meet a blind person, and it was curious. Some of them reacted, just no reaction; just okay. Some of them, clearly, were quite edgy. But I would either, well, that was one way it would work. I would take them to my office then, and then take their sworn statement. I would type it. I had to have a way. Then, sighted attorneys would write down sworn statements about the case and what happened. I would type them, and then have the person read it and sign it, and swear them in, and all that business. Or I would go out, either, to their home or to their office, or some of them didn't want to be seen with a labor attorney either place. They'd want to go meet in a restaurant some place at 6 o'clock in the morning. You had all kinds of situations where now people who had labor complaints, were going to need to meet with a federal attorney on this stuff. So, I had all manner of experiences during the few months. But this supervisor, also, just right off the bat, he really got into this. And so he said, "Let's give you an assignment as a hearing officer." Then, you're the person who really sits there as the agency judge, and you're listening to cases that are actually being tried. And, you're the one there making the rulings about what's admissible or not.

I tried an interesting experiment, then. I could have had a reader sit there all day long, or I could do something else. Again, I was always trying to figure out ways to accommodate, Mary. And I hope other people will pick up on this, because there are techniques that you can use to get along out there in the real world. So every time, I noticed, I sat in for a few hearings; and any time that the hearing officer was going to be studying a document to decide whether it would be admissible into evidence, the hearing officer would stop the hearing; which would mean that the

court reporter would be sitting there doing nothing. So I went out and talked, on some breaks, to a couple of court reporters. And I said, "How would you guys feel if I were the hearing officer, and somebody wants to have me review a document to decide whether it's admissible or not; how would you feel about being my reader during that break? So I don't have to have a person just waste a day and sit out here." And they thought that was a splendid idea. So, that's how I did the reading during hearings. And that worked very well. And then otherwise, what you're doing, is ruling on motions and so forth. So, so far as a blind person doing the job, there is, you know, nothing to it. You sit there and you listen, and you rule, or you review documents. So essentially, that's what you're doing, is the hearing officer or the judge. It was easy and I got, frankly, quite comfortable at it in a little while.

And so, by this time, oh, the five or six months were running by. And this decision had to be made, could I get the final, you know, could I become actually assigned there, or would I have to go back to Washington? And, in my mind, and in the mind of everybody else there, it had been a success. And of course, I would be assigned there and that would be it. As it turned out, the Regional Commissioner sent a note back to the big boss in Washington, recommending that I not be permanently assigned there.

Clarke: Oh no!

Omvig: So I made a speedy trip back to Washington, and ultimately got my Washington, the General Council, to assign me to that job, over the refusal of the Regional

Commissioner, which made things very uncomfortable for a while. But anyway, I was there.

Now I see, Mary, that we're going to have a problem. Either we can do some more taping another time, or I can just really rip through, now, in ten minutes or so, the rest of it.

Clarke: It's up to you.

Omvig: I can do it either. Maybe, let's try the ripping through, or you decide whatever you want to do later.

Clarke: Okay.

Omvig: Okay, so now I'm working in New York City. My wife is trying to get some singing stuff going. I've got a brand new baby whom I love, and I've got a wonderful job, and I get another raise when I get out there being a field attorney. And things are great. Then my good old pal and mentor Kenneth Jernigan got hold of me, and this would have been in 1968, sometime, and said, "We have people who travel as national representatives out to the state conventions each year; so that we've always got somebody representing the national office at the National Federation of the Blind state conventions." And, "How would you feel about making some of these trips?" And I thought I'd feel really good. He said, "You've now got a story to tell, and it would be helpful if you'd do that." This was a volunteer thing for the National Federation of the Blind. My expenses were paid. So I started to do that.

And, no place I went in America, Mary, for the next almost the next year...if I started in the middle of, well, I

started in the middle of, 1968, doing this. And in the spring of 1969, I had visited by this time, maybe 15 states. No place, did I meet any blind person who had had the kind of training that I had had at Iowa. Nobody was doing anything like marching off to, you know, Washington, D.C., and working and traveling and going to New York City. Why, this was such a phenomenon to blind people that people scarcely believed that it actually really happened. So my old itch, back to that grammar class that said, "Someday I might like to run a training center like you are running, Dr. Jernigan." It started coming in me. And I talked to him about it a couple of times, because I felt each time that I'd go to a state convention, I'd always call him up and fill him in on the activities that had gone on there, and who was good and who was bad, and whatever. So then it got torn, finally in the spring of 1969. And I was up in the state of New Hampshire to speak at a convention and this; you know, if the Iowa Commission for the Blind training here changed my life forever, so did New Hampshire in a very negative way. I got up there and made my usual speech on a Saturday night, like I made at a banquet, and talking and trying to inspire people. And after I had got done speaking, a lady came over to me and was just sobbing and crying. Several people came over to shake hands and meet me. This lady was sobbing and crying, and I went to her room and talked with her most of the night afterwards. And the long and short of it is that she is a blind person. As a young, sighted woman, she had been a public school elementary teacher, and then she had gone blind. And she wanted to go back into teaching, but she had gone to the agency for the blind, and they just absolutely refused. They just said, "You know, blind people don't do this."

2:00:00

Omvig: And she finally had enough guts to go to the Director of that agency, and he said, "Look, that's just not possible. We have this wonderful, new sheltered shop in Manchester, and that's for blind people; that's where you belong. That's why we built it." And, she had told me that she was earning 24 dollars a week there at that sheltered shop. So she told this Director about Judy Young. I assume that name has come up here in the tapes before. And, Judy was our first blind elementary teacher in the public schools here in Iowa; was the first blind elementary college student to get through the University Of Iowa School Of Elementary Education.

[Brief interruption.]

Omvig: I got to remember; so I'm up to New Hampshire.

Clarke: Would you be too tired to finish this afternoon?

Omvig: No, I think I could finish, because I will speed, now. The rest, that's really all the background, now, since I can do the rest in a half hour.

Clarke: Okay then, let's do that.

2:01:29
(End of Interview)

Beverly Tietz
10-21-2011